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ABSTRACT

Achieving both career development and a successful relationship requires a give and take in career choice between partners throughout the stages of a relationship. Whose career takes precedence at different stages of the relationship? How are spousal career decisions today made differently than in the past? How can partners' career decisions be made in the future? Couples can help or hinder each other's career development and the general well-being of the relationship. The career issues with which couples struggle are presented, interspersed with research and activities that can be used by career practitioners to assist couples in managing career-related decisions. (Contains 15 references.) (Author)

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From Dink to Alphabet Soup & Back: The Ebb and Flow of Career Choice Between Partners

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Chapter Twelve

From Dink to Alphabet Soup and Back: The Ebb and Flow of Career Choice Between Partners

Sally Gelardin & Alex Hochman

Happy loving couples make it look so easy.
Happy loving couples always talk so fine.
Till the day that I can do the dancing with my partner,
Those happy couples are no friends of mine.

-Joe Jackson

Introduction

Achieving both career development and a successful relationship requires a give and take in career choice between partners throughout the stages of the relationship. Whose career takes precedence at different stages of the relationship? How are spousal career decisions today made differently than in the past? How can partners' career decisions be made in the future? Couples can help or hinder each other's career development and the general well-being of the relationship. The career issues with which couples struggle are presented, interspersed with research and activities that can be used by career practitioners to assist couples in managing career-related transitions.

Issues

Spousal career decisions are made differently today than in the past. Men and women are living and working longer. Whose career takes precedence depends upon the stage of the relationship, i.e., newly-weds, first child, empty nest, retired, care-giving responsibilities, re-entry, retraining. Career factors influencing the relationship include the following: (a) women-owned businesses are the fastest growing businesses; (b) family-owned businesses are increasing, often requiring start-up assistance of spouses and affecting family lifestyle and choices; (c) fluctuations of the economy can result in layoff of one or both of

the partners, need for retraining and career changes; (d) service-oriented professions (mostly women) are more stable than manufacturing or business (mostly men) in a slow economy.

Research

Have things really changed? The husband in the dual career family has an easier time keeping his work and his home separate. This makes the wife less competitive in the marketplace. In a study of dual career couples (Hoffman, 2003), only 7% of women and 11% of men agreed or somewhat agreed that their career had suffered so that their spouse could further his or her own career (didn't feel they were being held down by spouse). Only 11% of men, as opposed to 56% of women, felt that they took more responsibility in household chores.

Blossfield and Drobnis conducted a 20-year study from 1979-1999, finding the following: (a) despite women's dramatic success in the labor market, there has not been a dramatic change in the roles of husbands and wives at home; (b) the husband in the dual-career family has an easier time keeping his work and his home separate while the wife is expected to interrupt her work-day for family issues; (c) this makes the wife less competitive in the marketplace; (d) women from working-class families are more likely to be encouraged to keep their careers as their pay is more likely to influence the standard of living in their household; therefore working class husbands are more likely to share household chores. In contrast, although her education and pedigree may be at a higher level than that of a working class wife, the woman married to the higher earner is more likely to face inequality between herself and her husband in the home.

But what happens when the primary wage-earner is downsized? Since the beginning of time, anthropologists believe, women have been programmed to seek a mate who can provide for a family (*Newsweek*, May 12, 2003). Several million American families are now experiencing the quiet, often painful transformation that takes place "when Dad comes home with a severance package." Between 1997 and 2002, women-owned firms increased at twice the rate of all firms. As of 2002, women-owned firms in the U.S. account for 28% of all privately held firms.

Women are changing the nature of the marketplace. Women's perception of success is based on different criteria than men's perception of success. Men often value climbing the corporate ladder and winning the game. Women perceive success as balancing work and family, working a reduced-hours schedule, though women who work longer hours are more likely to feel successful at work (Tolbert, Valcour, & Marler, 2002).

As they age, partners may have different career and home needs. The

National Center of Health Statistics reports that during 1981 to 1991, there was a 16 percent increase in the divorce rate among couples that have been married 30 or more years. The major issues that challenge couples in the second half of marriage include dealing with conflict, being able to communicate, sexual concerns, finances, and children. However, older couples need to also cope with their health, learn how to have fun together again, plan for their retirement years, and decide what to do about their aging parents.

Life-Work Activities for Couples

What can a couple do to manage conflicting career and home issues? Following are three favorite activities of dual career couples:

Activity 1: Draw Your Vision of Your Couple Relationship

Create a storyboard of your couple relationship (or of another couple's relationship, e.g., parents, children, clients). Divide the storyboard into three sections. Draw how you visualize the couple relationship in the past, the present, and the future. Share with your partner.

Activity 2: Listen to Music

Listen to the lyrics of oldies but goodies. Suggested lyrics: Al Green, *Let's Stay Together*; Carole King, *Where You Lead*; Paul McCartney, *We Can Work It Out*. What emotions or thoughts do the lyrics of each song emote? Mention career issues that surface from listening to the lyrics such as home/work balance, relocation, or care-giving for children or aging parents or partner. Reflect upon your own couple relationship or the relationship of your parents or children and their intimate others or another couple.

Activity 3: What Motivates You and Your Partner

This activity is based on an exercise designed by English (2003) to help individuals understand their primary unconscious motivations. It has been extended into a couples activity.

Number a paper from 1 - 9. Write the names of nine people with whom you have a characteristic in common. Next to each name, write the characteristic. In which motivational category does each characteristic fall? Choose among (a) Survival, (b) Passion, (c) Quiescence (peacefulness, quietude, meditation). In case of doubt as to the category, keep asking how you are similar to the person you chose. Count up how many entries you have in each category. Which motivation predominates in your life? Which is absent or lowest? Be aware that at different times in your life, one or another motivation may dominate and that you can balance

yourself if one motivation is significantly absent or reduced in your life. It would be helpful to have at least one or two of each motivation every time you perform this activity. Make sure each of you has a balance of these motivations in yourself and that you don't depend on your partner to provide these motivations.

Future Predictions

In the future, marriage partners will have a variety of choices to make about careers.

Adults who grew up as latchkey children may choose to live in a more balanced lifestyle that will affect location of work (commute, relocation), hours, childcare, and community involvement. Since adults are living and working longer, spouses will have more career and job changes; more later life workers will choose to work part-time, go into business for themselves, work as consultants, and develop new ways of working (e.g., job-share, telecommuting, shorter hours, less physical and mental stress). As partners age, one may need to serve as caregiver of the other, requiring a flexible and accommodating work schedule. Older partners may also need to support adult children and provide caregiving for grandchildren or parents.

Suggested Courses of Action

(1) Create your own definition of what a marriage partnership is and the role of career development in the partnership.
(2) Use family or couples therapy as a growth tool, not as a crisis tool.
(3) Schedule time together.
(4) Delegate responsibility in the relationship.
(5) Sit down with your partner and write what each does in the house and how long it takes.
(6) Write down how much time each of you spends at work.
(7) Draw up your ideal list of household responsibilities (e.g., switch chores, do more or less around the house, re-evaluate gender roles) and share with your partner.

Summary

Just as family issues intensify in a family business, so couples' issues intensify when career choices are involved. Research has shown that dual career couples have unique challenges to manage, and that there is an ebb and flow of career and lifestyle issues that need to be dealt with throughout the stages of the relationship. A variety of activities have been presented

that career practitioners can employ to assist couples in managing career-related transitions.

Couples and Olives

"The next time you're in a restaurant, look around. Someone who can't stand olives will accidentally get some and the person they're with will say, 'I can't believe you don't like olives,' and happily eat their olives. See, a lot of things are that much simpler when you're a couple. Like ordering food. Couples develop their own strategies."

-Paul Reiser

Recommended Reading

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